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ABSTRACT

This booklet is aimed at helping school board members better understand the public relations process and build stronger support for public education. The public expects board of education members to be responsible, energetic communicators who are genuinely responsive to issues raised by the public. The author advocates identifying the various "publics" with which the board comes into contact, seeking professional public relations assistance, establishing a communication policy that is conscientiously followed, holding informative meetings, developing effective problem solving techniques, communicating effectively as a board and as individual board members, and learning how to handle values conflicts. Each chapter concludes with a brief list of helpful hints on improving communication. (Author/DS)

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COMMUNICATION HANDBOOK

by Joseph P. Rowson

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Communication Handbook

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Communication Handbook for School Board Members

Foreword

This handbook is part of a continuing effort by the National School Boards Association to help improve school public relations. Along with *How to Start and Improve a P.R. Program,* by Don Bagin, and *Radio: Your Publics Are Listening,* by Gary Marx, this booklet is aimed at helping school board members better understand the public relations process and build stronger support for public education.

Americans want good communication with their school boards. They want to know what's being taught to children and they want to know how their tax dollars are being spent. They expect school board members to be responsible, energetic communicators. And, for their part, school board members want to communicate. They realize they've been elected or appointed to be responsive to the people in setting policy for education in their communities.

Unfortunately, the desire for better communication does not ensure it. A knowledge of the tools and skills needed for effective communication is also required.

In this booklet, the vantage point is that of the individual school board member. The question it addresses is: As he or she works to serve students in the community, how can the school board member make sure there will be good communication? One way is to understand the process of communication. Another is to learn more about the individual board member's role in communicating with the public. A third is to realize how a board of education as a political entity can promote better communication. These three goals and others allied with them are explored in this booklet.

It is our hope that the questions raised and the suggestions made in the *Communication Handbook* will help school boards and board members establish continuing, effective communication.

Harold V. Webb
Executive Director

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Chapter 1

First: A Definition

Soap is Soap;
is Zest
different
from Dial?

What is "communication" anyhow? Probably the shortest and best definition is that communication is a sharing of *meaning*. I don't care so much that you understand what I say, but I do want you to know what I mean. My saying something and your hearing it don't ensure communication. I may say it wrong or you may hear it in a context I didn't think of. We have to *work together* to understand each other's meaning. School board members and the people they serve must learn how to get across their respective meanings.

The commercial world spends huge sums of money to help us as potential customers "understand" their products. If we understand that Dial means feeling fresh all day or that Zest means we can be forever free of soap-scum on our bodies, we'll buy their products. At least that's the theory.

School systems, taken as a whole, spend very little to see that they are understood by their "customers." How many school systems do you know that have courses in their schools to teach students (who are the upcoming parents and taxpayers) about the educational system? How many school districts in your area employ full-time communication professionals to advise them?

"What we mean to do is to provide students with the knowledge and the skills they'll need to be productive and happy adult citizens," declares one veteran school board member. "But from some letters to the editor I read, you'd think we meant to pervert youngsters into lazy, ignorant, ill-disciplined and subversive weirdos," she laments.

Most people, of course, don't believe board members are out to create a crop of weirdos. But most people also do not

understand what board members *are* trying to do. One reason might be that board members don't understand the people well enough either. To reach a shared meaning with people, board members must listen as well as talk.

A teacher would be foolish to walk into a classroom full of new students and begin a lesson on thermoelectric couples. First, he or she should find out how much the students already know. Then, hopefully, the teacher can plan lessons and assignments to see that each student will understand thermoelectric couples by the end of the course.

School board members should use a similar approach. They need to devise methods to find out how well people understand the school district's policies and programs. It's also useful to know how people *feel* about the district. With accurate knowledge of what people know and how they feel, it's easier to plan communications to increase understanding and build positive attitudes.

Let's assume, for example, that your board has adopted a new curriculum-development approach called BASICS. It was designed by a Florida firm to instruct teachers in a specific method of developing curriculum and lesson plans to improve student thinking skills.

It would be unwise simply to put the program into effect. Instead, you and your administrative staff need to find out what the public knows about curriculum and how it's developed. You need to find out if there's likely to be misunderstanding. People might believe you're adopting a "back to basics" program (with which BASICS is not associated). Having listened to people, you can plan ways to explain what you're doing and reduce misunderstanding. Instead of fighting ghosts for months after adopting the program, you anticipate your public's information needs.

Elaborate definitions of communication have been developed. But when we look at the word itself, we learn that "communication" comes from Latin. In that ancient tongue, it meant "to be in communion with" another person. In other words, the people involved had their minds in unison; they understood what each other meant.

Communication TIPS:

* Train yourself to listen before speaking.
* Remember that what you mean is not always what you say and that what people hear isn't always what you said.
* Remember that communication has not taken place unless both parties share the same *meaning*.

Chapter 2

Identifying Publics

Look at
all those
Indians
— George A. Custer

There are more publics out there than we might think. The term "public" is deceptively simple. It makes us think of a mass of humanity going shopping, riding elevators, working at desks, brushing their teeth, crowding onto freeways and going to football games. Any attempt to describe the public, however, seems to lead to list making. We try to think of all the different kinds of people who make up the public.

That we feel compelled to make such lists implies that there is, indeed, something *different* about each group we list. Lots of things can make them different. Age, sex, occupation, income, marital status—we've all filled out enough income tax forms and credit applications to know how people are classified.

The problem, from a communication standpoint, is that these differences imply different communication needs. And, if communication implies listening to people and figuring out a way to talk with them so we'll understand one another, we've got to do that with *each different group*.

Life would be a lot simpler if this weren't true. If we could count on everybody seeing things in pretty much the same way, needing the same types of information, being equally knowledgeable about our educational programs, being equally willing to support funding for education, being open to new ideas to the same degree—then a single communication plan would serve us well. The hard fact is, however, that we must individualize our communication efforts to meet both our needs and the needs of the members of the various publics.

The following diagram could represent one school board member's list of publics.

PUBLICS

Internal	External
Other board members	Parents
Superintendent of schools	Non-parent taxpayers
District's top administrators	Members of civic organizations
School principals	Reporters
Central office consultants	Neighborhood improvement groups
Teachers	Parent organizations
Students	Education association (or union)
Custodians	City council
School secretaries	County board of commissioners
Food service workers	State department of education
Technicians	State legislature
Coaches	Federal government
Teacher aides	People with businesses near schools
School volunteers	Police department
School bus drivers	Minority group representatives
	Recreation organizations
	Church groups
	"Militant" groups
	Vendors of school supplies and services
	Construction companies and architects
	Neighboring school boards
	State school boards association
	National School Boards Association

Each of us should make our own list like the one in the diagram. A list you create for yourself will be most useful to you. It will take only five minutes to make a first draft, which is good enough because the list will keep changing. New groups and individuals appear on the scene and must be talked to and listened to about their particular concerns. But making the list is, in itself, a valuable process. It points out the diversity of people each board member must reach. The list also is the first step in planning to reach those people.

Sobering thought for the day: You probably are communicating with all of the groups on the list whether you like it or not and whether or not you have any specific plan for communicating with them. They are getting "messages" regularly from you by the way you act as a board member and when your board takes official actions. They are forming impressions and attitudes and are increasing either their knowledge or their ignorance of schools and school programs. The only open question is whether you wish to

exercise any concrete control over the communication that inevitably is taking place.

Of course, this isn't an important question if you don't care what people think, understand or feel about schools. It's a crucial question, however, if you see yourself as a vital communication link between the school system and the people.

Let's assume you do see yourself as a communication link. What then? Is it reasonable to expect a school board member or a board to effectively communicate at all times with an extensive, changing, growing list of individuals and groups?

Like the fellow who was asked if he had trouble making up his mind your answer has to be, "Well, yes and no." It is *not* reasonable to expect you to carry on the same intensity of communication with all groups at all times. It *is* reasonable, however, to expect you to have a *plan* which provides for access to the board by all groups on the list and an openness to their views. It is also reasonable to expect you to step up the tempo of your communication with a given public when it is clear that public does not have adequate information or holds negative attitudes toward school programs.

The process of setting the school district budget for the upcoming year is a good example of how a communication plan can help the board. The decisions you and your colleagues on the board make in that process will vitally affect operation of the schools. Those decisions also will affect taxpayers in your community.

During the weeks leading up to adoption of the budget, your communication plan should emphasize better understanding of district fiscal affairs. The jargon involved in school budgets (e.g., "general fund," "bonded indebtedness," "building fund," "mill-levy") should be explained to reporters covering the budget story. Meetings to explain the budget should be scheduled with taxpayer organizations, civic groups and other tax-supported agencies.

As an individual board member, you need to act as a sounding board or listening post, becoming aware of the attitudes and the knowledge of the citizens concerning the school budget. You can seek out specific people you know are "key communicators" in neighborhoods, shopping centers, churches, clubs—people you know who are on the "grapevine." Knowing how well people understand the budget and what their attitudes are will help you in your deliberations with fellow board members and administrators. It will also indicate what additional communication efforts are needed.

These communication efforts are, of course, in addition to those communications required by law, such as a public hearing and official publication of the proposed budget. Communication by board members should normally be planned to complement the work of the district's superintendent, budget director and public information staff.

Since the budget-adoption process is an annual event and because it is always important, it never comes as a surprise. Therefore, it should always be included in your district's ongoing communication plan. School board members have no valid excuse for not effectively communicating budgetary decisions.

Other issues, however, provide less notice than the annual budget. Consider, for example, the group of citizens which appears at a board meeting, its members intent on getting board permission to use a school playground for a trail-bike course. (Trail-bikes are those lean-and-mean looking machines with the knobby tires that will plow through mud and climb unbelievably steep hills.)

What kind of communication plan will handle this one? Unlike the budget, this is not a planned event. You don't even know if what these people are asking for is legal. You may guess there's as large or larger a group of neighbors around the school who will oppose the noise, dust and danger they see in a "race-track" proposal. You might think if one school is allowed to have such a course other schools may soon become involved. You worry about supervision.

Obviously, it would be unreasonable to expect a clear-cut board plan for communicating effectively with this group on the spot. Most reasonable board members would ask for time to consider the request, directing the superintendent and board legal counsel to make recommendations for later action.

You can, however, *listen*. The fact that these people have come to the school board with their request probably indicates that no adequate facility for their form of recreation exists in your community. While you may eventually have to deny the request, you might want to communicate with other agencies or alert private enterprise to the need for safe motorcycle tracks and courses.

The budget and trail-bike examples are extremes. The budgeting process is a routine (though not always calm) event for which you should have communication plans individually and as a board. The trail-bike people are one of your "publics" who surprise you with a new concern. Both, however, illustrate facets of your communication role as a school board member.

In both instances, board members should listen to make sure there is common understanding. In both cases, the board as a whole and you as an individual board member should be as aware as possible of the needs of the public with whom you're dealing. In both instances, official action should be taken only after informal, individual listening and talking.

Finally, it is clear that the precedence of a given public depends on time and circumstance. During negotiations, for example, the teachers' association or union becomes a high-priority group. The teachers themselves, as instructors, become a high-priority group whenever the board is considering matters of curriculum or the educational process.

The mayor and city council may be working with your board to have tennis courts built at schools in low-income neighborhoods on a shared-cost basis. Simultaneously, they may be working to redirect funds which a local utility company is now required to pay to the school district into their budget. Again, the circumstances will affect the way you communicate at a given time.

The man who runs a drugstore near an elementary school may be your neighbor and a good friend. But he also may be displaying adult magazines and paperback books next to the candy counter, resulting in your receiving phone calls from parents who expect the school board to "do something to get rid of that smut!"

The list of communication situations facing school board members is probably endless. The point of this chapter is that the list need not be overwhelming. All of the communicating needed to reach all of the publics you serve can be accomplished if you and your school board have a *plan*. The resource list at the back of this booklet includes sources which give details on communication planning. Workshops available to train you in communication planning are also contained in the resource list.

Communication TIPS:

* Make a list of the publics with which you and your board must communicate.
* Recognize that your publics are changing—you communicate with a passing parade.
* Remember that each public has different communication needs.
* Develop a flexible communication plan which allows for both the routine and the surprising.

Chapter 3

Getting Some Public Relations Help

I think
we can lick
this Edsel
problem with
a little PR,
Mr. Ford

Public relations is not a coverup for problems. When problems surface, their consequences must be squarely faced. The consequences are usually much less harsh and can be dealt with in a more rational fashion if the public is kept honestly informed about *both* the good and the bad. In fact, recent communication research indicates that organizations are much more believable to their publics if they admit their mistakes or shortcomings.

Automobile ads which admit the sponsor's product isn't perfect, for example, have been shown to motivate more people to buy the car. What does that say to school board members? Perhaps that the *whole story* of your district should be told continuously **and accurately, even when mistakes or failures have occurred.**

School boards actually have no ethical choice but to maintain effective, honest relations with their publics. After all, the community hands its children over to the school for a major portion of each day for at least nine months per year. You and your colleagues on the school board have a moral obligation to tell the community what's being done for—and to—those kids. Moreover, because a major chunk of the tax dollar goes to the school district, you have a legal obligation to keep the public informed accurately as to what you're doing with all that money and whether it's really helping students learn.

The profession of public relations is in some respects comparable to the practice of law. You have a school board attorney to help ensure that what you do is legal. Likewise, your

district should have competent public relations advice to make sure you're communicating openly, honestly and well.

Ideally, you should have at least one full-time public relations professional on your administrative staff. Not all districts can afford such professionals, but there are some steps you can take to get good public relations help anyway.

For example, there are probably PR professionals living in your community who can give your board and administration part-time assistance. Or, you might work cooperatively with other districts in your area to hire a specialist and share the cost. In many states, "intermediate school districts" exist specifically to provide services such as communication assistance to districts in their respective regions.

At the very least, a competent school administrator who has some public relations training should be made responsible for your program. Just as you would never consider allowing your district's financial dealings to be conducted without competent supervision, you cannot afford to allow your communication program to be conducted without an administrator in charge of it.

One problem: Current statistics show that some 72% of school administrators have never had any PR or communication training. Even if you do not have any specially trained administrators, however, you could identify an administrator who would be willing to take some courses, attend seminars and in other ways become your "in-house expert."

In any case, once the administrator is assigned responsibility for your communication program, don't expect instant rapport to develop between the board and the community. In fact, don't expect the communication person to establish that rapport at all. The mere fact that you have a lawyer does not exonerate you or your staff from behaving legally. Neither does the fact that you have a PR specialist absolve you or your employees from carrying out communication responsibilities.

The public relations person serving your district should be used in an advisory and training capacity. Since everyone associated with a school district (including board members, custodians, teachers, secretaries, food service people and administrators) is assumed to be an expert on all that happens in the schools, all need to be good communicators. It's your PR specialist's job to help them be good communicators.

When a teacher has to deal with a student discipline problem,

he or she should be well informed of due-process laws and the legally established rights and responsibilities of students in your state. If the teacher is not well informed, disastrous legal, financial and community-relations consequences can result.

When that same teacher sits down with parents for a conference about their student's progress, he or she should be well skilled in communicating. One teacher alienating one set of parents can cause complaints, bitterness and rumors which can spread eventually throughout the community.

Some public relations help can also be provided in the form of good information through staff newsletters and bulletins. But a large portion of the job will necessarily be done through training sessions and direct personal assistance to your staff.

One of your most important public relations jobs as a school board member is to require the district's administration to obtain competent public relations help.

Communication TIPS:

* Public relations is not a coverup for problems.
* The whole story of your school district must be told continuously and accurately.
* The open admission of failures and shortcomings is likely to *increase* public confidence in your board and district.
* School boards have moral and legal obligations to communicate openly and honestly.
* An administrator, preferably a PR professional, should be in charge of your PR program.
* Since every school district employee is a "spokesperson," all need communications training.

Chapter 4

Establishing a Communication Policy

One of these days, we've got to get organized

One of the most important actions a school board can take is to adopt a policy. Here is a sample policy on communication developed by participants in a recent training session for school board members and administrators in Nebraska:

> The Board of Education is committed to the principle of open, two-way communication with its internal and external publics. In line with this commitment, the superintendent of schools shall have responsibility for establishing, maintaining and adequately staffing an ongoing communication program. The administrator assigned to direct the program shall report to the superintendent and be a member of the superintendent's cabinet. The Board of Education shall provide adequate financial support for the communication effort and shall annually review the program to evaluate its effectiveness. While the Board of Education recognizes the need for a formally established program of communication, it also recognizes that each district employee should communicate openly and honestly with the public and encourages employees to do so in their respective areas of responsibility.

You may or may not like this sample. If you don't, write your own or borrow one from another district that already has one. The point, of course, is to establish what you consider a good policy and stick with it.

Some examples of policies actually adopted by school boards in various sections of the country are available from the National

School Boards Association's Educational Policies Service (EPS/NSBA).

The policy you adopt should contain at least the following major elements:

- Recognition that the board of education has a responsibility to foster effective communication;
- Clear placement of responsibility for administration of the program in the hands of the superintendent;
- Indication that, like any important program, this one is to be adequately staffed and directed by a central-office administrator responsible to the superintendent;
- Commitment by the board to support the program financially;
- A reminder that the board will regularly evaluate the program to check on its effectiveness;
- Acknowledgment that communication between the schools and the people of the community takes place through informal contacts by the educational and support staffs as well as through formal media.

To back up the formal policy statement, administrative guidelines or rules should be developed. While these rules are not to be adopted as policy, you as a board member will want to be sure to follow them because you expect all district employees to follow them.

Here is one set of administrative guidelines. While they were developed by the Maryland State Department of Education, they also would be useful for the employees of a local school district. Moreover, these guidelines are especially good reminders to school board members about dealing with the press:

- If you can answer a reporter's question in your own area of responsibility, do so honestly. Don't guess. Don't speculate. Be specific. Don't be defensive.
- Respond promptly. Few things irritate a reporter more than a lack of sophistication among public servants concerning media deadlines.
- All reports and surveys are public property. You may not withhold such data when they are requested—even though you

believe the reporter is going to use the material to hurt a program. You do not have to release rough drafts, working papers, preliminary figures or notes.

- Too often, program administrators want to pick their own time for publicity, especially when the project is fully completed. In fact, preliminary publicity about a program enhances the likelihood that it will get public attention when it is complete. Don't pass up opportunities because your project isn't tied up in a neat package.
- It is usually not necessary to be audit-accurate with figures. Good, round numbers will do.
- Avoid educational jargon. Always.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. I'll call you back in 10 minutes." And don't forget to call back.
- Nothing can be assumed to be off-the-record. A reporter is not engaging in private conversation but in news gathering.
- Never ask a reporter to show you his or her story before it is published. If you think certain parts need emphasis, say so in the interview.

Communication TIPS:

* Adopt a comprehensive communication policy for your district.
* Make it clear that the board intends to actively support the communication program but also that the board will carefully evaluate it.
* Ensure that the communication program is adequately staffed and financed.
* Direct the district administration to back up your policy with clear communication guidelines.

Chapter 5

Carrying Out the Policy

General MacArthur,
may I please have
a word with you?
— Harry S. Truman

It won't do any good for your board to develop a fine set of policies and guidelines on communication if those documents are ignored after they're printed. There must be a commitment by you personally, by the board as a group and by the staff you employ to put the words into action.

How do you implement the policy? Through your work in three major communication areas: Your board meetings; the interaction of your board as a group; and your personal communication.

Board Meetings

The regular school board meeting is one of the most visible means of school board communication with the public. The way your board meeting is conducted has considerable influence on the way people feel they are being treated by you as public officials and on the way the media report the news that develops during your board meetings.

Working as a Group

Communication among board members is a key element in whether the board as a governmental body considers alternatives, makes sound decisions and establishes useful policies. Ultimately, that inter-communication affects the way students in the community are educated. If your board members are stilted, uncommunicative and lacking in group communication skills, your

board meetings are likely to be ineffective in providing for the educational needs of your community. If your meetings are open, if they involve some "brainstorming" before decisions are made and if they are friendly while remaining work oriented, they are likely to serve your community well.

Communicating Personally

Finally, as an elected or appointed public official, your own personal communication style is important. It is important not only to the people who call you or stop you on the street to ask or give advice on school matters; it is important to the way you see yourself and how self-confident and assured you are in your role as a school board member.

Communication TIPS:

* Recognize that adoption of a communication policy is only the *beginning* of a good communication program.
* Consider the communication effects of your board meetings, your interaction as board members and your personal communication style.

Chapter 6

The Board Meeting

I spent a week there one day

The setting, organization and conduct of school board meetings have much to do with how well people understand the business being transacted by the board. Board meetings are business meetings, not public forums—although boards can hold public forums outside of regular meetings. Board members must be vigilant lest their regular meetings are reduced to discussions of what brand of gym-floor varnish to purchase. At the same time, they must prevent their meetings from becoming so "open" that shouting matches and table-pounding demonstrations dominate at the expense of necessary business functions.

The Agenda

The trick is to strike a balance between open access to the board and the need to conduct the public's business properly. The agenda used for your meetings can help you do that. It is, in itself, a communication medium. It states clearly what items are to be discussed and in what order.

As soon as the agenda and accompanying material for the upcoming meeting are prepared, they should be delivered to board members and made available to the news media. In most districts, this will allow four or five days for board members to study the issues. And reporters will have time to tell the public what's going to happen at the meeting.

The agenda normally should follow an established order-of-business agreed to by your members. Here is a sample:

1. Roll call
2. Approval of last meeting's minutes
3. Communications
4. Committee reports
5. Superintendent's report
6. Instruction report
7. Personnel report
8. Business report
9. New business

This example has some important communication advantages. Aside from a few quick, routine matters (roll call and approval of old minutes), this order of business gets immediately to the subject of "communications." This makes clear the board's desire to communicate. During this portion of the meeting, people can address the board on specific issues. Board members can review letters received from citizens or information from other public agencies whose actions might affect schools. The board can direct the superintendent to follow up on matters of concern by communicating with people, businesses or governmental bodies involved.

Many boards require that people request *in advance* to address the board. The purpose of such a policy is not to restrict access to the board by people concerned about issues. Rather, the intent is to require people who will address the board to *plan* what they'll say. This approach also gives board members time to research the pertinent issues so they can give reasoned, informed responses.

Holding the "communications" section of your meeting early has another advantage: It helps reporters. The television reporter, for example, is often on a short deadline. He or she has to shoot film, get back to the studio, write a story, have the film processed and edit the film to match the story—all in time for the next newscast. Sound-film featuring the land developer who wants to buy your school property to construct a shopping center is an important story. But it won't be on the evening news if you make the developer wait until 9:45 at night to speak.

Morning newspaper reporters normally must get stories written and filed by midnight. Afternoon paper reporters normally have a deadline around noon. Radio reporters must edit their tape and write an accompanying story before their report can go on the air. Many interesting stories fail to receive timely reportage simply

because school boards ignore these deadlines in the conduct of their meetings.

Committee Reports

The "committee reports" section of the agenda is an opportunity for members to report on the work they're doing in special board committees or with citizen advisory groups. Your district may have a committee to develop better student understanding of other cultures. A committee may be working to upgrade the program for gifted students. A task force may be investigating ways to improve the math program. You may be the board representative to a group of business people advising the district on career education ideas. All of these activities should be reported at the board meeting.

Superintendent's Report

The superintendent, as chief executive officer of the board, should likewise report reasonably early in the meeting. He or she is, presumably, carrying out the instructions given by the board and everyone has a right to a progress report.

Instruction Report

Following the superintendent, in our example, the next item on the agenda would be the "instruction report." It has to be made clear to the public—and to board members—that *instruction* is why you're operating schools. If the person in charge of instruction appears at every regular meeting to report to you then the teaching-learning program of the district will receive continuous attention by all concerned. The board should require the less effective programs to be aired in public right along with the pride-and-joy projects.

Personnel Report

You can't run a good school district without hiring good people and properly evaluating them. So, you need to know about the

current status of school district employees. Some personnel matters must be discussed in closed sessions, of course, but you should require that a maximum amount of clear information is presented in open meetings. The citizens have a right to know the criteria for selection of teachers and administrators, for example.

Business Report

The business affairs of the district are important. The methods used to purchase equipment, take bids on construction projects, establish insurance programs, borrow money, provide workmen's compensation, operate the transportation system and make sure everybody's paid—all these are essential to successful district operation. You need to know about them; so does the public.

It is important, however, to concentrate on the significant business dealings during your regular meetings. Avoid bogging down in the details of bids, contracts, tuck-pointing and electric rates. Instead, require brief summaries you can understand and make the school administration responsible for the details. Your prime concern should be whether the methods and procedures you've established by board policy are followed. Your auditing firm is responsible for checking regularly on the details of your business office transactions to be sure they are legal and follow sound business practice.

The Setting

Some school boards meet in elaborate, walnut-panelled rooms equipped with television lights and nickel-plated microphones. Some meet in conference rooms off superintendents' offices. Some have cushy chairs at long desks for the public. Many use metal folding chairs. Some have press tables complete with phones for reporters. Others let reporters saunter in and find a seat where they can.

No matter. With a minimum of effort, any school board can provide a dignified, appropriate setting for its meetings. Here are a few aspects of the setting which are likely to determine whether the board meeting accomplishes its communication goals:

- The place ought to be comfortable for the number of people attending the meeting.
- Informational materials should be available near the entrance.
- The board members should be seated so they can see one another.
- The press and the public should be able to see and hear what's going on.
- You should have name plates or at least cardboard signs placed so people can tell who the board members are.
- When you move your meeting to a school building, make sure someone from the staff checks with the building principal to see that a temporary "board room" is set up and functional.

Communication TIPS:

* Provide copies of materials for the meeting to board members and news media well in advance.
* Set up your board meeting agenda to assure maximum communication.
* Have an order-of-business which accommodates the news media.
* Establish procedures which allow people to address the board but which also preserve the business function of the board meeting.
* Have a significant report on *instruction* at each meeting.
* Emphasize the importance of district business affairs, but don't bog down in minutiae.
* Provide a setting which helps, rather than hinders, communication.

Chapter 7

Communicating as a Board

It'll never
fly, Orville
—Wilbur

A board of education is a group of people attempting to get a job done. Groups of people communicate differently than individuals. A lone person will think things through and then take some action. A group must *process* ideas: Allow each member to state his or her beliefs, compare notes, reach a consensus and decide whether to move toward a goal. This "group process" becomes more complex as the size of the group increases. Fortunately, most boards of education are small enough to permit efficient and effective group process.

There are at least two questions you can legitimately ask about your board's group process. The first is, "How do I perform as a member of this working group?" The second is, "How does our board perform as a group?"

Rating Yourself

The "Individual Group-Discussion Rating Sheet" shown here is a way to answer the first question. It lists a series of statements and allows you to rate yourself in response to the statements. Read each statement and circle the number indicating your judgment of your performance during school board discussions. Your total score will help you gauge your group-process skills and individual items will show where you might improve.

INDIVIDUAL GROUP-DISCUSSION RATING SHEET

This is a guide for rating your participation in the group discussions of your school board. Beside each statement, circle the number which best indicates your judgment about your performance in the group discussions.

	Very Little	A Little	Undecided	Well	Very Well
1. I clearly understood the goal of our discussions and knew what we were trying to accomplish.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I listened to and accepted others' opinions even when they didn't agree with mine.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I was willing to reach intelligent compromises between my viewpoint and the views of other board members.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I made an effort to keep the board talking on the subject at hand.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I was concerned about others' feelings and tried to understand them.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I offered facts, stated my beliefs, gave suggestions and contributed ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I saw that others had a chance to speak and helped them enter into the discussions.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I asked questions to clarify points I did not understand.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I paid attention to the group discussions and talked to the whole board rather than just one or two people.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I felt that my opinions and feelings were understood and accepted by the board.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I felt satisfied with the board's discussions.	1	2	3	4	5

Total Score _____

RATING SHEET SCORING GUIDE

Here is a suggested guide for scoring yourself on your Individual Group-Discussion Rating Sheet:

Total Score	Performance Rating
11-15 points	Poor
16-30 points	Below Average
31-40 points	Average
41-50 points	Good
51-55 points	Excellent

Too often, instead of squarely facing problems in our boardsmanship, most of us let problems linger, never totally satisfied with our performance but never doing anything concrete to improve it either. The rating sheet and scoring guide are tools to get you started toward improvement. Once you've been through the rating-scoring process a couple of times, you probably will automatically begin judging your performance in board discussions while they are in progress. You'll learn to make corrections as you participate.

Rating Your Board

The question of board members' performance as a group can be attacked with the use of a "Checklist for Group Process." The checklist, like the rating sheet discussed above, contains a series of statements for rating group process performance. In this case, however, statements indicative of poor performance are listed on the left side of the checklist and statements indicating good performance are on the right. The checklist is most effective if individual board members complete it privately first, then the entire board works to reach a consensus on each matched set of statements. Again, the total score shows overall performance; individual items indicate where improvement is needed.

GROUP PROCESS CHECKLIST

This is a checklist to help you evaluate your board meetings and to increase sensitivity to some problems which can develop as board members attempt to work together.

Check the number on the rating scale that corresponds to your evaluation of the meeting in each of the seven categories. For example, if you feel responsible participation was lacking, check 1; if you feel the board was somewhere in between, check an appropriate number on the scale.

RESPONSIBLE PARTICIPATION was lacking. We served our own needs. We watched from outside the group. We were grinding our own axes.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	RESPONSIBLE PARTICIPATION was present. We were sensitive to the needs of our board as a group. Everyone was "on the inside," participating.
LEADERSHIP was dominated by one person or a few persons.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	LEADERSHIP was shared among board members according to their abilities and insights on respective issues.
THE GOAL was vague. The purpose of the group discussion was more or less assumed by board members.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	THE GOAL was clearly understood by all board members. Each member knew what the group was trying to accomplish.
COMMUNICATION OF IDEAS was poor. We did not listen. We did not understand. Ideas were ignored.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	COMMUNICATION OF IDEAS was good. We listened and understood one another's ideas. Ideas were vigorously presented and acknowledged.
COMMUNICATION OF FEELINGS was poor. We did not listen and did not understand feelings. No one cared.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	COMMUNICATION OF FEELINGS was good. We listened to, understood and recognized feelings. Feelings were both shared and accepted.
AUTHENTICITY was missing. We were wearing masks. We were being phony and acting parts. We were hiding our real selves.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	AUTHENTICITY was present. We were revealing our honest selves. We were engaged in authentic, open exchanges.
ACCEPTANCE OF PERSONS was missing. People were rejected, ignored or criticized.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	ACCEPTANCE OF PERSONS was a significant part of our give-and-take. We respected the uniqueness of each board member.

TOTAL SCORE _____

GROUP PROCESS CHECKLIST SCORING GUIDE

This is the suggested guide for scoring the performance of your school board on its group process performance. It is recommended that each member rate the board's performance first, then the board as a whole should attempt to reach consensus on its performance.

Total Score	Performance Rating
7-14 points	Poor
15-21 points	Below Average
22-28 points	Average
29-35 points	Above Average
36-42 points	Good
43-49 points	Excellent

The questions raised by the checklist for group process are tough ones to face up to. But if you and your fellow board members have the courage to spend a working session examining your own behavior in board meetings, you may find your performance improving and your discussions remarkably richer. Your solutions to problems might be less strained and more imaginative.

Agree-Disagree

Another way your school board might consider its performance as a group is to participate in the "agree-disagree" exercise shown here. The statements all have to do with the functioning of groups, which is the issue you want to examine.

In completing the "agree-disagree" exercise, it is important that you follow the directions carefully. The exercise is designed to bring out a maximum of discussion and to do that it forces each of you to make quick judgments on a series of vague statements. You may agree with none of them wholeheartedly. But, as with many real issues your board faces, you *must* make a decision and do so rapidly. The exercise allows your board to edit or modify the statements in order to reach unanimity. You must make similar modifications in a variety of real situations your board faces, but particularly when deciding on the exact wording of a new policy.

AGREE-DISAGREE STATEMENTS ON GROUPS

Instructions: Read each statement once. Mark whether you agree ["A"] or disagree ["D"] with each statement. Take about five minutes for this. Then as a group try to

reach unanimity on each statement. Try especially hard to discover the *reasons* for disagreements. If your board cannot reach agreement, you may change the wording of any statement to make it acceptable to all members.

KEY: Mark an "A" if you agree; a "D" if you disagree.

☐ 1. A primary concern of all group members should be to establish an atmosphere in which all feel free to express their opinions.

☐ 2. In a group with a strong leader, an individual is able to achieve greater personal security than in a leaderless group.

☐ 3. There are often occasions when an individual who is part of a working group should do what he or she thinks is right regardless of what the group has decided to do.

☐ 4. Members should be required to attend meetings for setting group goals and discussing group problems.

☐ 5. Generally, there comes a time when democratic group methods must be abandoned in order to solve practical problems.

☐ 6. In the long run, it is more important to use democratic methods than to achieve specific results by other means.

☐ 7. Sometimes it is necessary to change people in the direction you yourself think is right, even when they object.

☐ 8. It is sometimes necessary to ignore the feelings of others in order to reach a group decision.

☐ 9. When the leader is doing his or her best, one should not openly criticize or find fault with his or her conduct.

☐ 10. There would be more attentiveness in groups if the leader would get quickly to the point and say what he or she wants the group to do.

The Psychology of Groups

Still another way of looking at your board's group performance is to recognize the psychology associated with membership in groups such as boards of education. Psychologists have devoted considerable study to group behavior because people seem so strongly influenced by groups they belong to. Some people are even strongly influenced by groups they *don't* belong to but would like to join.

Here are some findings related to the psychology of groups:

- CHANGES IN ATTITUDE CAN BE CAUSED MORE EASILY FROM INSIDE A GROUP THAN FROM OUTSIDE. You are more likely to be influenced in your attitudes by another board member than by a non-board member. An "outsider" will not be listened to with as much openness as a fellow board member. And the more active you are as a member, the more likely you will be to influence other members of the board.
- A GROUP HAS ITS MOST INFLUENCE IN AREAS WHICH IT EXISTS TO SERVE. A board of education will influence its members strongly on educational matters but not much on non-educational matters. Other members are not likely to influence your religious beliefs, political views or buying habits. But they are likely to strongly affect your educational views.
- THE MORE IMPORTANT GROUP MEMBERSHIP IS TO YOU PERSONALLY, THE MORE INFLUENCE THE GROUP WILL HAVE ON YOU. If you enjoy being a school board member, the other members are likely to have a strong influence on you. If you don't see board membership as important, you're likely to be more independent.
- THE MORE PRESTIGE A MEMBER POSSESSES, THE MORE INFLUENCE HE OR SHE WILL HAVE. Prestige does not necessarily relate to office-holding. The president of your board may not be the most influential member. If you ask other board members whom they would ask for *advice*, you'll quickly identify who's influential. A member named by a majority of others is very influential.
- THE MORE CLOSELY YOUR BOARD MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM — AND IN CONCERT WITH ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS — THE

MORE SMOOTHLY CHANGES WILL GO INTO EFFECT. People who work together considering and implementing changes understand the changes better and see the need for them. Changes suddenly mandated by board order are often misunderstood and poorly implemented. Shared decision-making, while apparently time-consuming and inefficient, actually makes for better decisions and better implementation in the long run.

- THERE IS A DANGER THAT "GROUPTHINK" WILL RULE YOUR BOARD. "Groupthink" is a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis. It is the tendency of the majority to resist strongly the views of the minority, even when the minority has a perfectly valid viewpoint. Your board can, however, build in methods which force consideration of a variety of alternatives before a decision is made. Just because a majority of your board thinks one way is right at first look does not mean it really is right or beneficial.
- THE STRENGTH OF YOUR BOARD LIES IN YOUR BASIC UNITY AND ABILITY TO REINFORCE THE VALUES AND ACTIONS OF ONE ANOTHER. Strain and imbalance in your board are often caused by the lack of a concerted effort to understand an issue and move on it together. A split into factions then follows. You don't have to *agree* with one another. It does help, however, to understand and respect one another.

Communication Tips:

* Rate your personal performance as a communicator during board meetings.
* As an entire board, score your performance in group discussions.
* Take time at a board work session to participate in communication exercises to improve the skills of board members.
* Keep in mind the psychological effects of belonging to and working with a group such as a school board.

Chapter 8

Communicating Personally

I find myself
at a loss for
words
— Calvin Coolidge

When you became a school board member, you probably noticed that the amount of communicating you do increased. If you're typical, some of that increase is in the form of letters you have to read and answer and other more-or-less formal ways of communicating. But the bulk of the communication you do is likely to be in the form of personal exchanges with other citizens.

You have to answer your phone more often to talk with a parent who doesn't understand the school's grading system or the guy who lives next to a school where the dandelions haven't been eradicated and are contaminating his lawn.

You have to attend more meetings as a school board representative. You are stopped in supermarket aisles and at cocktail parties to hear complaints and an occasional good word about the schools. You're required to present *your* views more openly and more directly, often on issues which arouse strong feelings.

Attitudes vs. Information

The communication of the "official" variety in your district helps keep people informed. The stories reporters write, the speeches the superintendent gives, the slide-tape show developed by the district information office. It is essential that this informing function be carried out.

But the communicating *you* do of the face-to-face variety has much more effect on people's attitudes. Face-to-face communication is special. People are swamped in mass communication. While driving our cars we have the radio blaring and the billboards glaring. At home, there's a half-ton of junk mail, the television, the

14 magazine subscriptions, the church bulletin and the plastic bag full of grocery store ads hung on the door knob.

Because of all this mass communication, people have learned to be selective. We can't pay attention to all of the communication all of the time. We can watch only one TV channel at a time. We have to learn to skim the newspapers and magazines for ads, stories and articles we find really important or interesting.

And how do we decide what's interesting or important? Most of us decide on the basis of our attitudes, beliefs, values and feelings. If an advertisement or an editorial seems interesting to me it's probably because it looks like one I'll agree with. Seldom do we pay much attention to mass media which are at odds with our values or beliefs. On the few occasions when we *do* read or watch something explaining a different view than our own, we usually do so only to seek evidence of how right we are and how wrong the opposing view is.

On the other hand, we're not nearly so rich in personal communication. A good conversation, once common, is now hard to find. In our electronic age, we *watch* conversations on the "Tonight" show. When we do find ourselves engaged in a good conversation, we find our attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings more affected than by mass communication. We find in personal conversation a give-and-take mass media messages do not offer and an emotional impact mass media seldom equal.

Unfor- nately, many of us feel less than perfectly skilled in personal communication. Our schooling in communication probably included diagraming sentences and writing themes. Some of us leaned how to give speeches or engage in formal debates. But where in our training did we learn how to respond to an angry person or tell another person our feelings on a subject without becoming overwrought and making fools of ourselves?

Most of us feel inadequate in the very form of communication which can serve us best as school board members. Fortunately, however, in the past few years several books have been written and some communication training courses have been developed. A short resource list in the back of this booklet contains some of these courses and books.

In essence, authors and educators now are able to help us learn the following:

- How to understand what another person is saying;
- How to identify the cause of problems in communication;

- How to listen to another's feelings;
- How to honestly express our feelings and change the situation causing those feelings;
- How to become more effective at problem-solving;
- How to resolve clashes of values.

Paraphrasing

We already possess the first skill listed above. We learned it in school. It's called "paraphrasing." After the teacher showed us a film or asked us to read some chapters in a book, he or she often asked us to repeat *in our own words* what we saw or read.

You can use this skill of paraphrasing in your personal communication by repeating back to another person what you think he or she said. The idea is to get the story straight by comparing versions of it. If you simply *assume* you understand the other person, you can often be dead wrong. And it's easy to paraphrase. All you have to do is say, "Let me see if I have understood what you're saying," and then repeat in your own words what you think the other person said. You can clear up misunderstandings before taking any action, often avoiding mistakes based on false assumptions.

Identifying Problems

You may think you're approaching a situation in a logical manner and attempting to seek the best course of action. But you can tell by the reactions of your colleagues that you're not being understood the way you want to be. Why does this happen and how can you learn to eliminate the misunderstanding?

The problem is that no two people ever experience the same situation in the same way. Each brings to the scene a lifetime of experiences, beliefs, feelings, and attitudes. From your viewpoint, what you're experiencing at any given moment is "reality." It's often difficult to realize that another person, involved in exactly the same situation, is visualizing an entirely different version of "reality."

One way to become more aware of how people are viewing and reacting to a situation is to use "transactional analysis." "TA" is

a method of looking at ourselves and others so we can communicate more effectively.

Briefly, the theory behind TA is that each person is psychologically divided into three parts: The "Parent," the "Adult" and the "Child."

The Parent is that part of us which retains the values, customs, religious traditions, and "do's" and "don'ts" we learned when we were small. At the time, we took most things big people said seriously and we still remember many of those things. We've discarded a number of the traditions that were handed down to us, but we still often consult our Parent to clear a decision with the religious, moral and social precepts we inherited.

The Child is the part of us which is emotional—the home of our feelings. When we were little, our feelings were intense and changeable. Now the feelings are generally weaker and more stable. But there's still enough Child in most of us to make us feel exuberant about an upcoming vacation or sad about not getting as large a raise as we'd hoped for. It's our Child that makes us feel psychologically "OK" or "not-OK" at any given time.

The Adult is our decision-making part—the logical, calculating, planning, rational part. We usually make Adult decisions. We may consider what our Parent and our Child have to say about a matter, but then we make a rational, Adult choice of direction.

The Adult is not always in command, however. Sometimes we simply fall back on what our Parent says is the "right" thing to do. Sometimes we allow our Child's emotions to rule. The effect on our ability to communicate when the Child or Parent controls us—or the person we're talking to—can be startling.

A problem can arise if there is a "crossed transaction." For example, I may ask you, "What time is it?" I am acting as an Adult, logically asking you for information. You may respond, however, "Why are you always nagging me about wasting time?" Your Child obviously has some strong feelings about the matter.

On the other hand, some perfectly pleasant exchanges can result when "parallel transactions" take place. You may say, for instance, "Kids today just don't believe in hard work and sacrifice like we did," speaking from your Parent. I can agree, "They sure don't," likewise speaking from my Parent.

Neither the crossed nor the parallel transactions illustrated above will get problems solved. Only when we are both acting in an Adult manner can we logically approach difficulties and correct them.

The reason for looking at people in the "Parent-Adult-Child" way is to realize that everyone is subject to the influences of feelings (Child) and values (Parent). Those feelings and values can sometimes get in the way of logical problem solving. The *real* problem may never get resolved because of the *apparent* problem feelings and values are causing.

Listening for Feelings

Many people we deal with as board members — especially those who call on the phone — are acting under the influence of their Child. They are experiencing strong feelings. And, because of those feelings, they are not approaching their problem rationally. Your job is *first* to help them get rid of the feelings and *then* to work with them to solve the problem.

How can you help another person eliminate the negative feelings that prevent him or her from handling a problem logically? Psychologists tell us that simply *listening* to those feelings helps considerably.

If you can ignore the facts of the matter for the moment and concentrate on the feelings the other person is expressing, those feelings can be released. Unburdened, the other person will be ready to approach the problem rationally. If you insist on dealing with the facts immediately, however, the feelings will remain a powerful obstacle to progress on the problem.

Listening for feelings is similar to paraphrasing. Instead of saying, "Let me see if I understand what you're saying," you say, "Let me see if I understand how you *feel* about this." The realization that another person knows, understands and cares how we feel is a great relief to all of us. You can provide this sort of relief and help the other person reasonably handle his or her problem.

Being Assertive

It's not always the other person who's upset about an issue or a problem. Sometimes, it's *me*. I'm just as prone to act under the influence of my Child as the next person. But how do I avoid an outpouring of emotion that just makes everyone else mad (or think I'm crazy)?

Two methods often used are aggression and submission. We either make an issue about the problem, thereby offending people,

or we submit to the situation and suffer in silence. Neither method gets anything done about our problem.

Psychologists say that we need to become "assertive." The assertive person is neither aggressive nor submissive. Rather, he or she can explain the situation and feelings associated with that situation in a constructive way — a way designed to get some action. The assertive person explains four things to the other people involved in the problem situation:

- Here's how I objectively see the situation.
- This is the way I feel about it.
- These are the realistic consequences I think we'll face if we don't change the situation.
- I'm willing to listen openly to your view(s) about the situation and your feelings about it.

The assertive person allows himself or herself and the other people to get honest views and feelings out on the table. The approach is non-blameful; there's an openness to all viewpoints and attitudes. The hope is that such openness will allow all parties to unburden themselves of negative feelings and get down to the real business of tackling the problem.

How Not to Solve Problems

Assuming that listening to others' feelings and being assertive works, how do we ensure good problem solving?

A lot depends on how we think about problems. People approach problems in a variety of ways — some more effective than others. Here are some examples:

- REMEMBERING — "How did we solve this same kind of problem back in 1969?"
- SEEKING UNDERSTANDING — "Let's see if we can all come to a common definition of the problem."
- LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT ANSWER — "What is the time-tested formula for resolving problems like this?"

Despite the apparent popularity of these approaches, none seems very effective at solving problems. The problem we face today isn't the same as the one in 1969 because no two problems

are quite alike. The appropriate solution won't necessarily appear just because we define a problem more clearly or understand it more thoroughly. Moreover, the fact is many problems don't have "right" answers—no one will know if the answer is right or not until it is tried and either succeeds or fails. Sometimes all we can do is take our best shot at a solution. The question is, how do we make sure our best shot is likely to hit the target?

Productive Thinking = Brainstorming + Evaluation

One way to get today's answer to today's problem is to use a combination of two processes: "brainstorming" and "evaluation." "Brainstorming" is thinking of as many solutions as possible in a short time period. "Evaluation" is looking at those possible solutions and picking the idea or combination of ideas that best fits the situation.

There are two rules for brainstorming: 1) It is a process intended to produce a large number of ideas, so *quantity* is most important. 2) No criticism of ideas is allowed (criticism is done in the evaluation process).

The key to successful evaluation is to use the realistic conditions your school board is facing as criteria for selection of a solution. How much money can you afford? How many people can you can assign? How much time is available? These are a few typical criteria.

The brainstorming-evaluation approach is called "productive thinking." It has a unique advantage over other methods: It produces a custom-made solution to the problem or situation you face. Productive thinking does not limit you to a single solution but provides a wide range of choices from which you may select one — or several — you'd like to try. It does not produce a "permanent" answer but rather recognizes that all solutions are temporary. As soon as conditions change, you can go back to the brainstorming process and develop a new solution.

Finally, while developing lists instead of moving immediately to a solution may appear to use up valuable time, the total amount of time spent worrying or arguing about a problem or trying to make a shopworn solution work can be much greater.

Try this sample exercise in productive thinking:

BRAINSTORMING: In three minutes, list *all the ways* you can think of that your school board could improve communication with

parents. (Remember, *every* idea counts and none are to be criticized at this point.)

EVALUATION: Now, narrow your list to three good, practical ideas for improving board-parent communication. Apply reasonable criteria such as cost, the availability of time and other resources.

Communication Tips:

* Remember, your *personal* communication has strong impact on people's attitudes.
* Use "paraphrasing" to make sure you understand the other person.
* Try "transactional analysis" to help understand people's feelings and values.
* Listen to others' feelings to help them deal with their problems logically.
* Be "assertive" in explaining how you see a situation and how you feel about it.
* Try "brainstorming and evaluation"—"productive thinking"—as an approach to problem-solving.

Chapter 9

A Word About Values

I may not
agree with
what you say,
but I will
defend forever
your right
to change
your mind

Values are strongly-held convictions. They are developed by a person based on his or her heritage, background, experience, education and culture. Values affect a person's ability to communicate because they often determine how open or closed his or her mind is on a given subject.

Communication is particularly affected by values when the topic under discussion is family life, religion, sex, politics, education, money, justice, or some other value-rich subject. In your work as a school board member, you can hardly avoid discussions on some of these topics.

The easy way out of "values-clashes" would be to deal only with people who share your own set of values. Obviously, however, most school boards and most communities are made up of people with a diversity of values. In fact, there is a serious question as to how desirable a monolithic values-structure would be for either the board or the community.

So we are faced with the task of communicating with people about subjects which are certain to stir up strong feelings — our own as well as other people's. The dilemma is how to have reasonable, fair communication when the situation promotes unreasonableness and unfairness.

Unfortunately, there is no guaranteed solution to this dilemma. Psychologists and communication specialists have, how-

ever, at least developed some ways of thinking about values and values-clashes which might be of some help to you in reducing conflicts. Here are some of the techniques that have been recommended:

- BE AN EFFECTIVE "CONSULTANT." Some people are responsive to an effective presentation of the facts. If there is a good reason for adopting or continuing a program in the schools, for example, present the evidence as convincingly as you can. It is possible, however, that a large number of people will *not* be impressed, so you can easily overdo it. A good rule of thumb is to present the evidence *once*. Stating your case repeatedly is often seen as nagging.
- MODEL WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN. Practice what you preach. If a program is good, you as a school board member should demonstrate your support for it. Spend some time in the classroom with students or at the briefing sessions for parents to show you want to be involved. If it looks like you vote one way and behave another, you may be seen as a "tool" of the promoters of the program.
- MODIFY YOURSELF. Although values are very strong, they are not completely unchangeable. As a matter of fact, you may find you've changed a number of your values in the last 10 or 20 years. Since it is clear that a large number of people have values different from yours on various subjects, it's possible *they* may be right. At least you might try seeing yourself in their shoes for an experiment to see whether you could live with the change.

In addition to the three ideas listed above, you might try "values-paraphrasing." This is a communication device similar in concept to the paraphrasing of others' messages mentioned earlier in this booklet. In values-paraphrasing, you must re-state the position taken by another person on a value-laden subject *and* state his or her *reasons* for taking that position. Only then are you allowed to state *your* view and *your* reasons. The other person then uses the same techniques, re-stating *your* position and rationale before going on to make his or her next point.

None of the techniques discussed here will guarantee that you reach agreement with people of opposing values. They do have one implicit message: "I don't agree with you because our values differ; but, I do respect you enough to listen to you."

We should not look upon our values as obstacles in our lives.

They are most helpful in guiding us as we seek intellectual and moral fulfillment. We should, however, realize that conflicts of values can prevent or deter communication. We should also learn approaches that will help us at least agree to disagree agreeably.

Communication Tips:

* Recognize that value-rich topics are fertile ground for conflicts in communication.
* Learn techniques likely to reduce values-clashes.
* Develop a philosophy of "agreeing to disagree agreeably."

A Final Note

This booklet is intended to prompt you as a school board member to take a serious look at your communication techniques. You may or may not agree with the ideas and suggestions presented here. Only you know the situation in your community, the make-up of your board, the approach taken by your superintendent.

The important thing is that you decide to plan your communication efforts as an individual and as a board of education. The problems faced by most school boards don't result from a lack of good intentions or even from a lack of openness toward the press and the public. They develop because no one ever thinks much about communication until a bad situation already engulfs the board and the administration.

The communication process — which requires assessment of your situation, planning a communication strategy, carrying out the communication and, finally, an evaluation of the communication to see whether it has done any good — is what this booklet asks of you.

As a member of a board of education, you are as close to the grassroots of this nation as any public official. If you cannot communicate with the people, it is unlikely that *any* governmental personage or body can. Therefore, in a very real sense, this country counts on school board members to demonstrate that democracy is workable. The key to that workability is communication.

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